

CHOKECHERRIES 2001

A S.O.M.O.S. ANTHOLOGY



FEATURING...

Jimmy Santiago-Baca

Rick Collignon

Thomas Fitzsimmons

Natalie Goldberg

Phyllis Hotch

Amalio Madueño

Sean Murphy

John Nichols

Jean Nordhaus

Rebecca Sieferle

Mirabai Starr

Summer Wood

& many others!

Texas State Optical

The summer after Jesse died, my mother took me to get glasses. I'd been living with different aunts and uncles off and on for the whole year Jesse was in and out of Baylor Hospital, and when they drove me across town to school at St. James I squinted hard to see what Sister Mary Joseph wrote on the blackboard every day. My grades weren't good. The insurance companies had long since canceled Jesse's policies – over \$30,000 in hospital bills, the collection agencies called to remind my mother every day – and every time anyone mentioned money to her she squinted like Jesse when the nurses poked his bruises again and again with a transfusion needle, trying to find an uncollapsed vein.

Sister Mary Joseph saw me squinting at the blackboard one day and said, "Stop that, will you, Travis?" and I waited till she'd turned her back again to screw up my face at what she was writing. When she turned back fast and caught me squint-wincing again, she put me up on the first row with the troublemakers and took me to Father Flanagan's office to call my mother.

Texas State Optical was the cheapest place to buy glasses in the early sixties, and my mother took me there to the TSO office next to the Salvation Army in East Dallas. The doctor put burning drops into my eyes and asked me to read eye charts without squinting and slipped lenses over my eyes and gave me cardboard and plastic sunglasses that looked like the blue-and-red-lensed things you wore in the 3D version of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* I never go to see. Outside, the sun was bright and my eyes hurt and my mother took my hand to the car.

Two weeks later, she drove me back to the TSO for my fitting. The glasses were a dark turtle shell, too heavy and big for my face, with thick lenses that made me look like I was gawking through broken Coke bottle bottoms. The optometrist asked me to read the charts again and then said I was done. My mother wrote out a check, which I knew would bounce, like the ones she'd written for groceries at the Piggly Wiggly the week before, and we walked outside into the sun and my mother took my hand.

I stopped and looked up and down Beacon Street, all the words on the street signs sharp-edged, every letter of every word as clear as if it were in my Texas History textbook two inches from my face. A giant cottonwood rose across Beacon in a park where my mother said she'd always

wanted to swim in the thirties but couldn't because of the polio epidemic.

For as long as I could remember, the year Jesse was sick and before, every tree in summer had been a giant blur of a bruised gray and green like a thundercloud building high on the Dallas horizon, but now I could see the individual leaves; thousands of them, millions, their sharp edges coruscating in the wind.

I let go of my mother's hand.

"I can see," I told her. "I can see all the leaves on the trees."

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"Texas State Optical," *Chokecherries: A S.O.M.O.S. Anthology 2001*

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